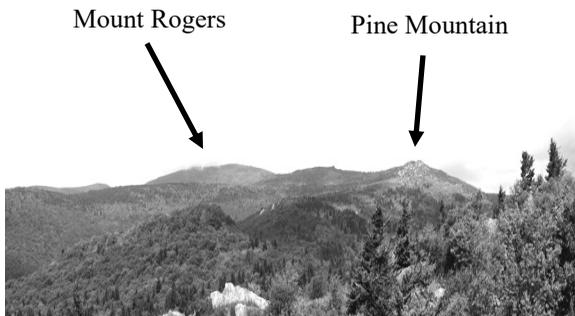


6 The Lost Forest

This mountaintop once looked like the summit of Mount Rogers - dark with a thick covering of old-growth evergreens.

In the early 1900s, a spur of the railroad came up through Massie Gap. Trains carried cut trees to the boom town of Fairwood on the north slope of Mount Rogers.

It took the logging companies only 12 years to clear the magnificent virgin spruce, hemlock, and fir forest from Haw Orchard Mountain, some trees with three or four feet in diameter and over 100 feet tall. This land will someday support another majestic evergreen forest if it is not disturbed. However, the harsh climate and strong winds will make re-growth a long, slow process.



7 Aged Giants

From here you can see the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area.

The two largest mountains on the horizon are Pine Mountain on the right and Mount Rogers on the left, which is a perfect example of the 'islands in the sky' effect. Mount Rogers is the highest point in Virginia at 5,729 feet above sea level.

This is believed to have been an active volcanic field millions of years ago. These mountains are composed of rhyolite, a volcanic rock similar to granite. Since rhyolite is more resistant to weathering than most other kinds of rock, Virginia's highest mountains are clustered here.

8 Now Bald

Past the new Red Spruce growth in front of you is Wilburn Ridge and Massie Gap.

The clearing of the forest in the early 1900s left behind vast open area. A thousand years' worth of fallen, rotting twigs and needles covered the forest floor in thick layers. Exposed to the sun and wind, the plant debris dried out. Fires started easily, and they often burned the topsoil down to the bedrock.

Eventually grass and shrubs began to grow on the burned land. People grazed cattle on the upland pastures that they called "balds." Farmers could stand on rocky outcrops like this one and locate their livestock by listening for the bells which they hung around the animals' necks. Since the park's creation, the wild ponies have grazed in this area to maintain the beautiful views afforded by those balds.

9 The Sculpturing Wind

To the left at this junction, it's a 500-foot walk up to Big Pinnacle. On the rocky exposed crest of Big Pinnacle, the constant wind leaves its mark on the plants.

Red spruce often become "flag trees." The wind bends and rips off the branches on their exposed windward sides, leaving only the branches on their leeward sides.

Over time, some plants have adapted to the constant winds by becoming dwarfs. These dense, low growing plants are less subject to damage and moisture loss caused by the wind.



Look for blueberry bushes, also known as Huckleberries, which are common here and ripen in late July.

Take care to follow the red blazes, as those are the ones that mark the Twin Pinnacles Trail, which will return you to the Visitor Center.

10 Forever Changing

From here, you can return to the Visitor Center either by retracing your steps or by completing the loop.

The forest on the second half of the loop transitions into a deciduous hardwood forest, characterized by the sugar maple, American beech and serviceberry. Legend says that in the spring of each year the mountain people would hold a community burial service for the folks who didn't survive the winter. The serviceberry, with its white flower clusters, got its name because its bloom signaled that the ground had thawed enough to hold the service.



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Virginia State Parks

Grayson Highlands State Park



Twin Pinnacles Trail Self-Guided Hike



www.virginiastateparks.gov

Welcome to the Twin Pinnacles Trail



1 Welcome to Virginia's "Sky Country"

The 1.33 mile Twin Pinnacles Trail leads to the two highest points in Grayson Highlands State Park. Hiking to the left along this easy trail, you'll reach Little Pinnacle (5,089 feet) in half a mile and Big Pinnacle (5,068 feet) one third of a mile farther. On this mountain, known as Haw Orchard Mountain, you will see evidence of both a northern hardwood forest and a spruce/fir boreal forest.

The numbered stops in this booklet correspond to the numbered posts between this kiosk and the Big Pinnacle. These stops along the way will help you to understand how both people and the forces of nature have changed this area through the years.

After passing the spur trail to Big Pinnacle, the Twin Pinnacles Trail loops nearly a mile back to the Visitor Center.

Please leave all plants and animals undisturbed. Enjoy your walk.

2 Boreal Forest

The evergreen trees you see here are Red Spruce. Typically found in southern Canada and the Northeastern United States, it is very unique to find them in the South.



Red Spruce

Ten thousand years ago, glaciers spread over northern North America. Although they didn't come this far south, the vast mile-thick sheets of ice changed this region's climate. Trees like the Fraser fir and red spruce that make up this remnant boreal forest once grew all over Virginia.

When the climate warmed and the glaciers melted, the cold climate trees survived only at elevations above 4,500 feet, creating an 'islands in the sky' effect. These 'islands' can easily be seen from afar as dark green mountaintops and provide a unique habitat for many northern animals.

4 Like a Trip to Canada

On Haw Orchard Mountain, the plants are not the only thing that is unique. The conifers in this boreal forest create habitats suitable for birds that are common up north.

The saw-whet owl, which makes its home in conifers and uses the red spruce as its breeding ground is rare but known to live in the park. At only three ounces, this owl species weighs about the equivalent of three slices of bread. Almost entirely nocturnal, it spends its days roosting in dense foliage.



The dark-eyed junco, a much more commonly seen sparrow-sized bird, makes its home along this trail and in much of the park. It nests in the ground, hiding the eggs underneath outcroppings of grass or leaf litter. Pause and listen for its high chirp notes and look for flashes of its white tail as it flies by.

Dark-eyed junco's nest

3 Living in Transition

Different kinds of plants grow at different elevations, partly due to temperature. The cooler temperatures found at higher elevations support plants not found at lower elevations. Between the elevation extremes is a transition zone which supports a mixture of plant types.

The trees with peeling, papery yellowish-grey bark are yellow birches. They grow in this mountain's transition zone where the lowland hardwoods mix with the upland conifers. The twigs, buds, and bark of the yellow birch provide food for grouse, deer, rabbits, and squirrels.



Yellow birch

The striped maple is another tree which flourishes in the transition zones along this trail. Most often found in the Northeastern United States, it succeeds here due to the cool temperatures and high rainfall. As you get further down the trail, keep an eye out for this smaller understory tree, its delicate green bark vertically marked with thin white stripes, and its leaves which are said to resemble a goose's foot.



Striped maple

5 Why It's Called Haw Orchard Mountain

The base of this mountain was once covered so thickly with hawthorn trees that early settlers called it Haw Orchard Mountain. The shrubs and small trees among the boulders and spruce trees here are mostly hawthorn and witch hazel.

In the spring, hawthorns bear fragrant clusters of white flowers that are visited by honeybees for their pollen. Among the tree's thorny, leafy branches, songbirds find protected summer nesting sites. Many animals eat the small, apple-like hawthorn fruits in the fall and winter.



Hawthorn

You might not notice the witch hazels until their yellow, ribbon-like blossoms appear in late fall. Many people believe that underground water can be located by a person who walks with a forked witch hazel stick held between their hands. This practice is called "witching."



Witch hazel



Saw-whet owl